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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006134

SIPDIS

NOFORN

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: AEGEAN ISSUE: TURKS DENY A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN FLIGHTS, NONETHELESS WILL EXERCISE RESTRAINT

REF: A. ATHENS 3994 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. ANKARA 5883 (NOTAL)

Classified By: DCM Robert S. Deutsch for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Turkey has not significantly increased flights in the Aegean and is not seeking confrontation with Greece, MFA and TGS officials told the embassy. The Turks provided data which (if accurate) indicate that they have not in fact significantly increased flights, but merely resumed normal activity following a unilateral reduction for July-September for the Olympics and Special Olympics. MFA Deputy Undersecretary Ilkin told DCM Oct. 27 that Greece is using this issue to press the Turks to keep flights at a lower level leading up to the Dec. 17 EU decision on Turkish accession talks. TGS told us Oct. 28 that the CHOD has ordered the navy, air force, and coast guard to exercise restraint leading up to Dec. 17. We believe the Turks have clearly heard our message to do just that. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On Oct. 27, MFA Deputy Undersecretary for Bilateral Political Affairs Baki Ilkin gathered officers from German, Spanish, French, UK, Italian, and U.S. embassies to discuss recent Greek claims of Turkish infringements and violations of Greek airspace (ref a). DCM represented Embassy. Ilkin said that these particular embassies had made inquiries on this matter either in Ankara or in capitals.

The Turkish Legal Position on the Aegean

[1](#)3. (C) Ilkin first asked MFA Deputy Director General for Maritime and Aviation Affairs Vakur Gokdenizler to brief on Turkey's overall position on Greek claims of infringements. Turkey believes that--contrary to Greek claims--every country has the right to fly military aircraft in international airspace over the Aegean. Greece insists that Turkish military aircraft must file flight plans; Turkey maintains that under the ICAO Convention of 1944, only civilian flights are required to file. The phrase "Flight Information Region (FIR) Infringement" is a Greek creation, he maintained. Additionally, the Athens FIR extends virtually to the entire western coast of Turkey, meaning almost every flight taking off near the coast flies into the Athens FIR.

[1](#)4. (C) Furthermore, Gokdenizler said, Greece claims to have territorial waters of six nautical miles but also to have airspace of 10 nautical miles. Turkey does not recognize the Greek claim. Ilkin added that from time to time Turkish pilots fly between six and ten nautical miles from Greek territory to exercise freedom of navigation. Finally, Gokdenizler noted that Turkish military flights in the Aegean are far fewer than Greek flights. For example, in 2003 the Greeks flew about 23,000 sorties, the Turks about 4600. According to Gokdenizler, 6-7 percent of TUAF flights are over the Aegean, compared to about 80 percent for the HAF.

Turkey Significantly Cut Flights for the Olympics...

[1](#)5. (C) Gokdenizler then reported that Turkey had committed to significantly reduce its flights in the Aegean "for the tourist season" and for the Olympics (August) and Special Olympics (September). It had done so. For example, in August 2003 Turkish military flights over the Aegean totaled 294; for August 2004, 126. Turkey also offered its airports for overflow and emergency air traffic and to exchange information/intelligence related to security for the Olympics. In answer to a question from the British DCM, Ilkin admitted that Turkey did not explicitly inform the GOG that it intended to resume its previous level of Aegean flights in October, but countered that Turkey had made clear that its unilateral reduction was a temporary measure for July-September. On claims of Turkish overflight of Greek islands, Ilkin responded that it might have happened, but only by accident or because a Turkish pilot may have been forced to overfly as the result of a "simulated dogfight."

...and Believe Greeks Want Reduction to be Permanent

[1](#)6. (C) Ilkin said that he did not know why Greece was raising this issue now publicly, but he assumes it is because Greece

would prefer the level of Turkish flights to remain at July-September levels and that the GOG is seeking to use the "critical period" from now until Dec. 17--when EU leaders will decide whether and when to begin accession negotiations with Turkey--to pressure the GOT to maintain a level of activity similar to July-Sept. 2004.

17. (C) Ilkin said that in addition to the normal channels, four special diplomatic channels exist for the two countries to work on Aegean issues. But, Ilkin complained, the Greeks have chosen to hash this one out in public by using press leaks rather than diplomatic channels. Ilkin said the Turks have sought to have both sides reduce flights proportionally, but have not made progress on this.

18. (C) On Imia/Kardak, Gokdenizler said that the following is standard Turkish practice: There are actually two islets in this group. When a Greek vessel moves to the eastern side of the eastern islet (i.e., between the islets and Turkish territory), the Turks will respond by moving a vessel to the western side of the western islet (i.e., between the islets and Greek territory) for the duration the Greek vessel remains in place.

19. (C) DCM said that the USG continues to support progress between Greece and Turkey on the Aegean issue in order to reduce tensions. He emphasized that we are in a critical period up to Dec. 17, and urged that both sides work to reduce tensions to allow "smooth sailing" as that date approaches.

CHOD Has Ordered Restraint

10. (C) POLMILCOUNS raised the reports of Aegean incidents with TGS/J5 Cyprus/Aegean Division Chief RADM Mucahit Sislioglu on October 28. Sislioglu confirmed what Gokdenizler said, that Turkey would dispatch a Coast Guard vessel to the western side of Imia/Kardak whenever the Greeks send one to the eastern side. Since 1996, he continued, the Turkish Coast Guard periodically would send a vessel to the western side of Imia/Kardak so as not to relinquish Ankara's claim to the area. For over a year (i.e., since before Sislioglu came to his current position), the standard was to conduct such a passage once a month. There have been three such passages since August, he said. Whenever Turkey does this, the Greek side sends a vessel to the eastern side of the islets. Since the distances are so short, the two vessels are often at opposite sides of Imia/Kardak at the same time, although they do not come in contact with each other. In response to a question, he affirmed that if the Greek vessel was slow in arriving, the Turks would not then send another vessel -- if the Turks have gone to the western side, they expect the Greeks to respond and take no further measure themselves.

11. (C) Regarding airspace violations, Sislioglu said the Turkish side has continued to exercise restraint, with the number of flights in the Aegean down in 2004 compared to 2003, even excluding the months around the Olympics when activity was deliberately held to a minimum. TGS/J3 had that morning compiled the data and had forwarded it to MFA with a recommendation that it be used in refuting Greek claims. (Comment: We requested the data from MFA and received it. We forwarded it via email to EUR/SE and Embassy Athens.) Sislioglu had no information with which to confirm nor deny stories in the Greek press about overflights of islands. He said he had doubts about the story of a simulated bombing run over two Hellenic Navy vessels. He voiced the usual Turkish complaints about the GOG's excessive use of NOTAMS (Notices to Airman and Mariners), warning aircraft and ships away from close to 20 percent of the Aegean. Occasionally, TUAF aircraft passed through these areas and that may have been what happened in the case of these ships. These were troop carrying ships, he asserted, without the kind of radar that would permit the ships to discern the altitude of approaching aircraft. They may have just been flying low and startled the ships' crews, he suggested. He accepted POLMILCOUNS' observation that other Greek radar in the area could have documented the altitude and flight path of the fighters.

12. (C/NF) Sislioglu confided that when the Greeks first protested to the GOT on Oct. 20, many senior Turkish military officer became angry. Since the Turkish activity was seen as routine, they suspected Athens was trying to make trouble. MFA officials worked to calm them down. Repeatedly stressing the confidentiality of this information, Sislioglu (please protect) said that MFA succeeded and that earlier Oct. 28 TGS Chief General Ozkok signed an order to the Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard that they should exercise restraint in their Aegean operations in the run-up to the EU decision in December. To ensure they understood the message, Sislioglu said he called the Navy to explain that there should be no more patrols sent to the western side of Imia/Kardak in 2004. While POLMILCOUNS was with Sislioglu, the Turkish Navy's confirmation of receipt of the order arrived. POLMILCOUNS

told Sislioglu that was the right reaction and expressed appreciation for efforts to calm the situation.

Comment: Turks Have Done Their Part

13. (C) Comment: Assuming a confirmatory NATO RAP (Recognized Air Picture), the data from the Turks suggest that the Turks have generally maintained a lower level of air activity throughout 2004, especially during the summer months. From Oct. 1 through Oct. 27 of 2004, the Turks flew 206 sorties, a reasonable number given that they flew 393 in October 2003. 2003 sorties overall averaged 389 (the monthly average for January-August 2004 was 198). The "tension" over flights in the Aegean is a recurring theme. The Turks have certainly gotten the message from us that they should not be confrontational on this issue; we expect this chapter in the Aegean saga should be closed, for now.

14. (C) That said, it appears that overall progress on settling the Aegean issue is stalled. The Turks told us a month ago that the Greeks are not ready to conclude a comprehensive agreement, and that the senior Greek negotiator was backpedaling on items the Turks thought were settled (ref b). We continue to have an interest in seeing the issues settled with clear rights for international passage (air and sea) and an end to cyclical tensions. Perhaps the Dec. 17 EU summit decisions will yield an environment conducive to progress.
EDELMAN